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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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Butterfly Gardening

While walking in the garden this week, I saw dozens of caterpillars munching away on the bronze fennel. While some people would have immediately grabbed the pesticides, I was delighted to see the fennel being systematically chewed down. Why? Because this garden was designed to be a butterfly garden.

Butterfly gardening is very popular. There are numerous books and infinite publications available to help the novice gardener achieve great results. All that is required is a little bit of knowledge and planning.

Of the 760 butterfly species that occur in North America, about 100 can be found in Florida. When planning your butterfly garden, you should use plants that attract butterfly species that are naturally in your region. Likewise, you should only use plants that are naturally adapted to your soil and climate.

To learn which butterfly species are in your area of Florida, review the UF/IFAS publication on Butterfly Gardening in Florida. It's available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW057> or by calling your local Extension office.

There are four stages in the butterfly life cycle: egg, larva, chrysalis (resting) and adult. In planning your butterfly garden, you must provide food plants for the larval or caterpillar stage and the adult stage. The adults require nectar plants for energy and moisture. The caterpillar stage requires a host plant on which it can feed and develop.

The adult butterfly feeds on nectar. While most will visit a variety of flowers, others have distinct preferences and have a more specialized menu. It's best to provide several kinds of nectar plants to provide a range of flower color, shape and size. Because butterflies require nectar throughout the summer and fall, include plants that bloom over an extended time or plants that bloom in sequence.

Some popular nectar plants include the butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*), plumbago, butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), pentas and Stoke's aster (*Stokesia laevis*). Be sure to group each plant species. For the adult seeking nectar, a mass of flowers will provide greater stimulation.



There are some butterflies that rarely feed on nectar and will only visit a garden if it has some *extra touches*, such as rotten fruit

Larval or caterpillar host plants must be tailored to specific butterflies. Some plants, like the passionvine, are hosts to several different butterflies. But for many butterfly species, caterpillars will survive only on a few, or in extreme cases only one, species of host plant. Some recommended larval plants for north Florida include the passionvine for the Gulf Fritillary, the milkweed for the monarch butterfly, the herb fennel for the black swallowtail, and citrus for the giant swallowtail.

When planting larval food, it's also important to group plant species. This will enable the caterpillars to easily move to fresh foliage once they have consumed the leaves of one plant. Remember, if you are successful, these plants will ultimately be chewed on and sometimes totally defoliated. As a general rule, a caterpillar will consume its body weight in host plant material every two days.

When establishing your butterfly garden, choose a site that will receive sun for most of the day and close to a water source so that the plants can be watered when needed. To keep your butterfly plants productive, apply a slow release fertilizer two to three times during the growing season.

To round-out the butterfly garden, add artificial puddles. Several butterfly species utilize free-standing puddles not only for water but for salts and breakdown products of decaying vegetation which is present in most puddles.

To keep your puddles from breeding mosquitoes, bury a shallow plant saucer to its rim in an area receiving full sun within the butterfly garden. Fill the saucer with coarse pine bark or stones and fill to overflowing with water. The butterflies are able to drink from the cracks between the pine bark pieces or stones but the mosquito larvae will have a difficult time becoming established.

Butterfly gardening is not difficult but does require some careful planning. It should be based on butterfly preferences—not human ones. Fortunately, meeting the butterfly needs will result in a beautiful and active garden.



Artificial puddles are a great addition to the butterfly garden

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>